

This Review deals with the desire for one comprehensive online identity after discovering multiple identities in second lives in the computer-determined world. The review considers two books of Sherry Turkle. The first Book "Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet" (1995) and the recently published "Alone Together" (2011).

Virtual worlds enabled people to create multiple avatars, to become somebody they want to be. It became quite popular to use different Avatars and Nicknames and therefor to assume different identities. To be one person in analog life and to have (a) different avatar(s) in digital life. But the urge to disguise keeps within limits now a days. Through the connecting of different cyber identities, all part identities become a complete identity again. This is what Google and Facebook are trying by connecting all their services. Before for every need we had a different Social Media. Now, everything is joined together and there is no need for a separation between your private and your professional life anymore, everything will be merged together in Facebook. Is that because we are longing for more authenticity? Or because the network enters our lives to such an extent that we don't distinguish between on- and offline and because of that we are longing for our "old" person within the network?

With the arrival of MUDs in the late 80s / begin 90s the opportunity arose to adopt one or multiple identities on the web. In her book "Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet" Sherry Turkle examines why people had the urge to be a different person on- and offline, why people had the urge to adopt different identities.

MUDs is a text based multiplayer real-time virtual world. It is a combination of role-play and life chat. The game creates different worlds in which the user has to assume different characters.

The virtual worlds became even more popular when Second Life was launched in 2003. Turkle has conducted many interviews with MUD players and Second Life user. They all have in common that they think they can improve their real lives by being another person in the virtual world. In her book she tells about people who are too shy to make contact with other people in real life but dare to chat with others in the virtual world. She talks about males who have a female avatar, about females who have an animal avatar, about cybersex, virtual love, virtual weddings and virtual sexual harassment. And again and again the people, Turkle interviews tell her how it feels to be never sure if the person, you talk to is the one for which she / he claims to be. Turkle's interview partners often lose their interest after a while; they seem to be bored if there is no chance to see the other person in real life and if they meet they are often very disappointed because they expected a different person. The idea of a person seems to be more beautiful than the truth, the text version of someone, shaped in a beautiful body is different from someone in real life.

Short after the explosion of users after 2003 the number of users has levelled off at 35.000 to 60.000 people online every hour. This number has remained the same in recent years.

The initial curiosity was extinguished again very quickly. After the enthusiasm follows disillusionment. Even malice and wonder and the question remains how could we find that great? Not being myself seems to become boring, not knowing if my counterpart is the one for whom I hold him or her. The projection of an avatar seems to be not satisfactory enough. So, after discovering the possibilities of virtual realities we are longing for being ourselves again. Thank god, Facebook appeared when the urge raised for more authenticity.

The computer as a test object of postmodernism?

Turkle says that "The computer has become the test object of postmodernism. The computer takes us beyond a world of dreams and beasts because it enables us to contemplate mental life that exist apart from bodies. It enables us to contemplate dreams that do not need beasts (Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet, S.Turkle p 22).

Turkle calls it her "French Lesson". The time when she came into contact with Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and other representatives of postmodernism. She didn't get their abstract theories until she concentrated on technology and the question how we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass. Suddenly it makes sense to talk about the relationship between mind and body, it makes sense that the self is made and transformed by language and that each of us is a multiplicity of parts, fragments and desiring connections. All these ideas are reflected in the virtual life. Eventually MUDs offer one experience of the abstract postmodern idea. They are decentered, fluid, nonlinear and opaque.

In her recently published book "Alone Together" Sherry Turkle describes the dependence of many young adults from technology. Like in "Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet" again she has numerous interviews with children, teenagers and young adults. It is becoming clear what great expectations we have of technology, we think technology can protect us from being alone. She talks to young adults who can never turn off their cell phones and are online day and night to avoid the feeling of loneliness. She talks about online identities, how you express your emotions on a Social Network Site, that technology makes it easy to express emotions while they are being formed, that feelings are not fully experienced until they are communicated, why texting seems to be easier than talking and about teenagers who have the feeling that over time the identity they perform on their SN profile feels like identity itself.

If I compare both books of Sherry Turkle, it is striking that after the experience of being someone else we go back to be ourself again. If I can not be sure if someone tells the truth about him- or herself, people lose their interest. People are only interesting as long as they believe that they can find out the truth about them. Facebook gives us the assurance to be able to find out the truth about someone. Longing for more identity means using your real name, using your real name means being honest. So, truth seems to be the key point in this.

It seems that we are longing for more authenticity, it should be about us, about who we really are. So we need a consistent, comprehensive identity that reflects who we are (or how we want to see ourselves). The lives of others seem only interesting as long as I know them or get suggested to know them.

Isn't it paradox that someone only seems to be authentic and therefore interesting if this person tells the truth, or rather makes us believe to tell the truth, even if we know better. What we see on FB is not the truth about someone's life but the edited version of someone's life.

In Turkle's "Alone Together" Audrey, a sixteen year old junior at Roosevelt summarises this phenomena pretty good, she talks about her Facebook profile as "the Avatar of me" she says that she would like to be more than she is online. The point is to do "a performance of you". That's what we do on Facebook, we are creating our own little ideal person and sending it out. It is still us (because that is what we decided) but a little bit edited. We edit our life in real life and in digital life. The need to make our life as interesting as possible is the same on and off-line, but "in text, messaging and e-mail, you hide as much as you show. You can present yourself as you wish to be seen. And you can "process" people as quickly as you want to. Listening can only slow you down." (Alone Together, S.Turkle p 207).

The question must be why do we accept Facebook information about somebody as truth?

I think there are two reasons for that. The first is, that in the digital world there is a consensual understanding about that it is allowed to present your life a little bit more exciting and shiny than it actually is.

People take the profile of somebody as reliable because when you decide to have a profile with your real name it is more reliable than having an avatar that could be completely different from your real identity. We trust Facebook because it is a self regulating system. We accept it as a guarantor of truth. It functions as a monitoring system. If I give my real identity, it will automatically become much harder to lie. I can edit my life on Facebook but I can not really lie, you are monitored by your friends because there is this merge of on- and off-line. People I am friends with on and offline know often how I spent my last weekend because we met. So they would find out if I would lie about it online. It would be an embarrassing moment if my friends would find out, that I don't tell the truth. So, what people do is decorate their lives in a way that it is acceptable to the norm and can not be exposed as a lie.

And the second reason is that it is true, that we stay closer to the truth because technology is forcing us more and more to the truth

Technology centralises all of our data, so it becomes more and more difficult to consist of different alter egos. Google and Facebook are the pioneers of the centralisation of data. Two examples:

With Google's recently changed privacy policy ("One policy, one Google experience") the possibilities of combining different Google services is boundless. From all our search entries in certain services Google will form a comprehensive identity. Google calls it optimised combine ability and gives an example of Google calendar who could warn their user to be late for an appointment because Google calendar can combine the user data with the location data coming from their smart phone.

Maybe that sounds so tempting that users only see the positive thing about centralising data.

Another example could be Facebook timeline

Every click, every change of place, every new digital friendship is stored in a retrievable timeline. And because in the future user will see movies and listen to music and reading texts via Facebook, it becomes more difficult to manipulate people's taste. Because the industry is very interested in true facts about their customers, in order to sell advertising. Therefore Facebook collect information about what their user really do and not pretend to do or only what they like. The information is identical with what the person really makes. In short, only those who have actually listened to twelve-tone music for hours, is recognised as a fan of twelve-tone music.

It is becoming harder to pretend to be a twelve-tone music enthusiast. In the future it will become more and more difficult to shape your Facebook profile.